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ABSTRACT

The Model of College Outcomes for Adults explains why adults might do as well as traditional students, despite limited participation and involvement in traditional residential learning experiences. The model's six components are prior experience and personal biographies; psychosocial and value orientation; adult cognition; life-world environment; college outcomes; and the connecting classroom. The connecting classroom provides an organizing metaphor to articulate the relationships, processes, and interactions essential for effective adult undergraduate learning. This metaphor has the following four key issues: ethos of an adult-oriented environment, learning of expertise, nature of the teaching learning process, and living in a multicultural learning society. The reflective, contemplative nature of the classroom setting provides the potential for integrating and connecting the adult's prior knowledge and experiences with the subject matter and, as a result, reconstructing their life-worlds. The connecting classroom conceptualization of the adult learner's experience suggests that adult learners are influencing institutional practices, procedures, and policies; instructional policies; and teachers' understandings and expectations of what it means to be a college student, what meaningful experiences are, and the potential development of understandings beyond an academic context and prior knowledge of the current world. (Contains 44 references.) (YLB)

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# The Experiences of Adult Undergraduate Students —What Shapes their Learning?

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**Abstract**

The lack of conceptual research on adult undergraduate students has limited the discussion and understanding about adults' experiences in higher education and key influences upon their academic learning. There is need to understand the adult learner's engagement in collegiate experiences through multiple venues of learning, both on and off campus. There is need to re-evaluate the assumptions of traditional academic and psychological development in college and consider adults' participation through their multiple life roles and as lifelong learners. Further, adults' developmental experiences take place beyond the immediate collegiate environment and directly influence their psychological and cultural growth. This article explores the adult learners' experience and discusses how the metaphor of the "connecting classroom" can be employed to foster new understanding of these learners' experiences and to generate new avenues for research. The article also explores needed direction for research and policy in the areas of teaching and learning, adult student collegiate participation and outcomes, and institutional effectiveness.

## Introduction

Adult learners are dramatically changing the nature of higher education today, comprising as much as 40-45% of the students enrolled as undergraduates (The National Center for Educational Statistics, 1996). These adults enroll part-time, take courses through the Internet and other distance technologies, and demand creative ways to complete their education where they spend little or no time on campus. Yet, most of the insights about the undergraduate experience are drawn from the past three decades of research on young adults and are consequently limited in explaining how adults learn or develop in college (Astin, 1977, 1993; Kuh, 1993; Pace, 1979; Pascarella & Terenzinni, 1991; Terenzinni & Pascarella, 1994; Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

Traditional academic policies and related instructional belief systems are being challenged with the presence of adult learners. Notions related to on-campus attendance, students' expectations of collegiate learning, academic performance outcomes, and learners' multiple commitments are both being challenged by learners and by many new policies and models of adult learner-sensitive institutions. Entire colleges have re-oriented themselves around service to an adult clientele, giving rise to a highly competitive market of small, for-profit and not-for-profit schools aimed toward the education of adult students. Even pedagogical and curricular practice in traditional universities and classrooms is showing signs of the influence of adult learners.

Therefore, administrators and faculty members need to understand what elements influence adults' learning, what they learn, and how they do it. They need a more complex perspective of the multiple learning worlds that influence the adult and the unique role of collegiate learning in a broader world that includes full-time work, roles as parent and spouse, and extensive real-world experience. This article explores this broader landscape of the adult as learner, considers the comprehensive elements of the adults' experience of learning, and suggests implications for considering the "connecting classroom" as a metaphor for generating deeper understanding of adults' collegiate experience and suggesting new

avenues for theory and research. Recognizing the policy imperatives created by the presence of adult learners in higher education, the article also explores ways to conceptualize the impact of adult learners on the institution of higher education.

**Background**

Two historic theoretical perspectives have generally defined student learning and development in college: the "cultural community" and the "talent development." Tinto (1975) utilized the first perspective, the "cultural community," in his studies of student attrition. His research identified the college as a new cultural community for students to enter, socialize, and integrate within, and where they established identity and participation. Drawing upon the work of social anthropology, certain "rites of passage" represented the students' development and persistence. Through these rites of passage, students become integrated into the culture to reflect congruence between self and culture. If the students were not able to fully integrate into the community or if there was a lack of congruence between the students and the culture, there was a mismatch. Tinto suggested that the more marginalized the students' intentions or actions, the less they were likely to remain in the cultural collegiate community (Tinto, 1975). Tinto (1975, 1987) also suggested external social systems, such as other cultural communities of the students, could undermine the integration and negatively influence the students' abilities to persist to degree completion.

The second perspective of "talent development," was presented by Astin's (1993, 1996) Theory of Involvement. The central aspect of this perspective is the students' physical and psychological engagement and the qualitative and quantitative actions of students and their devotion to their academic experience. It suggests that the greater the investment, the more significant the learning experience and the greater the growth. Astin argued that this commitment to collegiate life through involvement directly affected the students' intellectual and personal development, as well as their academic success (Astin, 1993; 1996; Bean, 1990).

While these theories might help explain the development of traditional college students, in reality adult students spend limited time on campus and have limited psychological interactions beyond the classroom. They are more often enrolled part-time, take courses during the evenings and weekends, commute to campus if they come at all, and have limited or no involvement in on-campus student activities. Despite these lower levels of campus involvement, rusty academic skills, and busy lifestyles, adults either report or demonstrate progress in their academic endeavors equal to or greater than their younger peers (Graham & Donaldson, 1996; Graham, 1998; Graham & Donaldson, 1999; Kasworm, 1990; Kuh, 1993; Kasworm and Blowers, 1994). In addition, these adult students are actively engaged in collegiate learning through highly diverse formats based upon access through varied times, places, curricular options, and distance learning technologies.

There are several possible explanations why adults might do as well as traditional students despite their limited participation and involvement in traditional on-campus residential learning experiences. The Model of College Outcomes for Adults (Donaldson & Graham, 1999) is one model that brings together these possible explanations and posits relations among them. The model is composed of six components: (1) Prior Experience and Personal Biographies, (2) Psychosocial and Value Orientations, (3) Adult Cognition, (4) Life-world Environment, (5) College Outcomes, and (6) the Connecting Classroom.

First, as adults return to college they bring personal biographies or histories influenced by their prior experiences in the real "adult world." These prior experiences include previous schooling as well as authentic life experiences from their work, family and community roles. These experiences influence adults' perceptions of how they will do in college, their perceptions of themselves, their classroom expectations and their knowledge structures or schema. These knowledge structures and mental schema then in turn influence learners' motivations, self-esteem, self-confidence, responsibility, and how adults will interpret their experiences in college by establishing patterns for understanding and evaluating their surroundings (Donaldson & Graham, 1999).

There are also many psychosocial dimensions that influence adults' abilities to persist and achieve success in college. These include the presence or absence of psychological distress, adults' commitment to the student role, possessing adequate study skills, having a clear purpose for participation, and the competing life roles with which most adults must contend. Furthermore, adults' evaluations of themselves as learners influence their participation patterns (Cross, 1981). Adults often attend college with a clear purpose in mind and compensate for any initial lack in confidence or rusty skills by working harder than traditional-age students. Adults likely draw upon an understanding of their learning habits that allow them to manage their time and energies to get the most out of school. Lastly, adult students are more concerned than their younger peers with the cognitive and quality aspects of their education (Kasworm, 1995, 1997; Bean & Metzner, 1985) and focus on achieving direct benefits from college and seeking as much as possible from the experience.

Adults' mental processes encompass three forms, (a) declarative and procedural knowledge structures, (b) metacognitive or self-regulatory processes, and (c) cognitive operations (e.g., accretion, transformation), through which their knowledge structures develop (Anderson, 1993; Bruer, 1993; Rummelhart & Norman, 1978). Adults' prior experiences also provide them with practical know-how about how to manage their time and study methods. They employ these metacognitive processes to monitor and regulate their work, learning, and personal life roles and their beliefs about how to combine their study methods, interactions with instructors, and classroom experiences (Donaldson, Graham, Martindill, Long, & Bradley, 1999). The abundance and complexity of the various life-roles of family member, worker, and student also interact and shape patterns of thinking and ways of connecting new knowledge to their own rich experiences in college (Kasworm & Blowers, 1994). These beliefs affect interactions and relationships with instructors, ranging from viewing instructors as authorities to viewing them as co-learners and peers (Kasworm, 1997). Adults report they learn expert knowledge by using either a hierarchical, building block

approach, or a networking approach to connect existing knowledge to unfamiliar, new knowledge (Kasworm & Blowers, 1994).

The social settings outside the collegiate environment and the people adults depend upon for support for their collegiate learning activities also deeply influence their college experiences. These settings include families, work, and communities where they participate as citizens and leaders. These settings also provide the context where adults learn in experience and construct what Kasworm (1997) labeled "life-world knowledge structures." These settings serve as out-of-class contexts for learning and act as alternative avenues for conventional campus involvement (e.g., social clubs, campus activities, work-study experiences). These settings offer places where adults construct meaning for what they are learning in their classrooms. "Reinforcing agents," or family members, co-workers, supervisors, and community members in the out-of-class social settings affect adults' return to higher education. These individuals either provide adults the psychological and social support needed to pursue their collegiate studies or undermine their efforts (Donaldson & Graham, 1999).

Adults may also be looking for different outcomes from their college work. Kasworm (1995, 1997) found that academic outcomes were related to adults' perceptions of how well they integrated academic learning with their life-world roles. She identified at least three outcomes including (a) distinct academic and life-world knowledge -- where learners maintained a distinction between what they were learning in class and their real lives; (b) elaborated life-world knowledge -- where students used what they had learned in college to elaborate on what they knew from their life experiences; and (c) integrated and transformed life-world and academic knowledge -- where adults integrated what they had learned across their various life-world and collegiate contexts.

At the center of Donaldson and Graham's (1999) model of college outcomes for adults is the college classroom. A number of researchers have offered evidence that the classroom is the center stage for learning for adults (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Dill & Henley,

1998; Donaldson, 1991; Kasworm, 1997; Kasworm & Blowers, 1994). Kasworm and Blowers (1994) reported part-time students place great importance on the relationships with faculty members and their in-class learning experiences. One explanation of how adults compensate for their lack of time is that their class-related learning and their relationships with faculty and other students make up the most powerful influences of their campus experiences. In addition, if adults have limited interactions with the college environment, they may instead gain support from family, friends, and co-workers and others. This is in contrast with traditional-aged students where the primary impact comes from their involvement with peers and in peer-related activities -- often outside of class. The classroom is seen as the center stage of the collegiate experience for adults (Kasworm, 1995; 1997). It interacts with other components of adults' lives to connect adults with their instructors and student peers. Classroom interactions provide a social context for learning and shape adults' role as college students.

**What This Means for Understanding Adults' Experience**

Rather than relying exclusively on the kinds of experiences obtained within the college community, this view of the adult learner in higher education attempts to account for a broader, more encompassing set of factors that interact in complex ways with the learner's academic experience on campus. This perspective differs from past beliefs and research suggesting that student success and learning is dependent upon social integration, involvement, and connectedness solely within the collegiate environment, of both the curricular and extracurricular culture of the college. The metaphor of the "connecting classroom" for adult learners suggests that we need to think of connectedness within an adult societal context, as well as within the key learning environment of the classroom. It places more emphasis on adults' classroom experiences and the essential role the classroom plays in the ways adults reconstruct meanings associated with various aspects of their life-worlds. This emphasis on the classroom context reflects Winnicott's (1965) idea of a holding environment within the context of development and the power of the socio-emotional

dimensions of the group and those dynamic relationships. Given the fragmented nature of adults' lives today, it makes sense that within the contexts of their life-worlds, they understand settings such as the college classroom as literally crucibles of meaning making. It also recognizes that the metaphor of the "connecting classroom" speaks more to perceptions, relationships and dynamic interactions that are part of an instructional process, rather than to the bricks and mortar of physical boundedness. In particular, with the growing alternative models of distance learning, technology-enhanced learning, and new models of curriculum and learning, adults bring a complex set of needs, goals and experiences which both frame and create the fabric for enhanced learning and development experiences.

From these perspectives then, learning is viewed as contextual and situated. The nature of what is learned - the knowledge derived and its meaning - comes to reflect the particular contexts in which adult learners find themselves. Thus, some adults maintain existing knowledge structures of academic and life-world contexts that are distinct and separate. Others, however, experience a transformation of knowledge structures as they seek to integrate these knowledge structures fully into their lives. It also suggests that other potent adult life contexts of work, family, and community equally transact with the collegiate learning experiences to both enhance and detract. Collegiate administrators and faculty must rethink the nature of the adult learner reflecting the current world and a multi-cultural world of understandings, involvements and impacts both upon the learner --- and upon the college.

In particular, the metaphor of the "connecting classroom" suggests that adult learning experiences serve as both a generative and a reconstructive function. The content and processes of the college learning experience is not just one of academic content. It is embedded and generates rich symbolic meanings and imaginative processes for the learner, beyond learning academic discipline content. It both modifies the learners' knowledge base, but is also impacts their sense of self, of action in the world, and of their connection to the broader cultural context. Most adult learners view themselves as becoming different as learners and as individuals, because they now come to realize they have entered into a new

cultural set of forces and into new cultural meanings which redefine them and their lives. This potency is currently being documented and explained through research on adult learning engagement in collegiate classrooms, and will be a major focus of future research through distance learning and technology enhanced learning experiences.

The classroom experience may also provide a site for reconstructing what it means to belong to these various cultural communities and the identities derived from them. In this sense, the classroom can become for the learner a kind of "practice community" through which they make sense of what it is they are learning. This notion of a community of practice reflects the background understandings of situated learning as social-psychological interaction in all of the adult life roles (Lave & Wenger, 1991). It also focuses on the significance of social relations and processes that involve the learner in discussions and explorations of meanings and belief systems. It also suggests that collegiate learning experiences become a site within the adult life-world where this reconstruction of meaning, cultural communities, and identities becomes possible. It is within this environment that these multiple identities are allowed to be named, and given expression or voice.

**The Connecting Classroom**

As we have noted, faculty and higher education administrators continue to ponder how adult undergraduates differ from younger undergraduates. Historically, there have been groups of adults who have adapted to the traditional young adult collegiate environment, and taken on the persona of operating in a youth-oriented collegiate environment. As colleges have become responsive to adults or have sought out this population to bolster flagging enrollments, adults have not needed to assume the culture of a youth collegiate world. Today, adults seek out environments and curricular structures that reflect their adulthood, their working lifestyles and their strong experiential backgrounds. Whether they enroll in evening schools, extension centers, independent

studies, adult-degree programs or other variants of adult-oriented structures, issues of access, relevancy and time-enhanced learning have become paramount. Yet, adaptations of structures and services supports have only responded to part of the engagement of adult learners in higher education. It also has become evident that key frameworks to define and determine academic learning effectiveness - such as Astin's (1985) theory of Involvement, Pace and Stern's (1958) theory of environment press, or Boyer's (1987) discussion of the undergraduate experience-- have limited viability in describing and explaining adult learning in undergraduate studies. There is increasing evidence that our understanding of academic effectiveness for adult learners requires a new organizing perspective beyond access and time-enhancements. From past research and examination (Donaldson, Graham, Kasworm & Dirkx, 1999), it is evident that we need to understand adult learner's involvement through the meaning structures of the adult student, rather than through past conceptual frameworks based in the institution and the holistic campus experience.

The *Connecting Classroom* provides this organizing metaphor to articulate the relationships, processes, and interactions, which are essential for effective adult undergraduate learning. As we have noted earlier, researchers have offered evidence that the classroom is the center stage or fulcrum for collegiate learning for adults. This research has challenged past beliefs that the total collegiate environment should be influential in developing the student. Yet, when one examines the defining interactions of most adult students with a collegiate campus, and when one examines key research studies of adult-defined key collegiate experiences, it is the classroom which provides the key focus and grounding for adult learners.

**Metaphor of the Connecting Classroom**

This metaphor of the connecting classroom has a number of key elements. These elements include: 1) Ethos of an adult-oriented environment, 2) Learning of expertise, 3) Nature of the teaching learning process, and 4) Living in a multicultural learning society.

**Adult-oriented Environment.** The Connecting Classroom represents the ethos of an adult-oriented collegiate environment. It suggests that the collegiate climate is an attitude, a set of environmental features, and a set of expectations and behaviors of collegiate personnel towards adult learners. Perhaps most eloquently discussed many years ago by the Commission on Nontraditional Study (1973), it is " more an attitude than a system and thus can never be defined except tangentially" (p. xv). Nevertheless, "this attitude puts the student first and the institution second, concentrates more on the former's need than the latter's convenience, encourages diversity of individual opportunity rather than uniform prescription, and de-emphasizes time, space, and even course requirements in favor of competence and, where applicable, performance. It has concern for the learner of any age and circumstances, for the degree aspirant as well as the person who finds sufficient reward in enriching life through constant, periodic, or occasional study" (Commission on Non-traditional Study, 1973, p. xv.).

Adults value and seek out classroom experiences that are based in relevancy, respect, adult dignity, and reciprocity of adult-to-adult relationships. The connecting classroom metaphor suggests an environment that embraces the value and worth of adults as knowledgeable learners, and which also values adult life experiences and perspectives as part of the learning process. For most adults, the classroom is the most influential and

significant experience in a collegiate environment. Adult learners suggest that the impact of the collegiate world comes through the key relationships and interactions between faculty, fellow students, the disciplinary content and related learning processes, and themselves as they seek meaning and competence in this arena. In addition, adults desire collegiate institutions that acknowledge and, as appropriate, integrate learning and support services reflective of their adult worlds, adult life circumstances, and adult learning interactions. This focus is in contrast to youth collegiate environments, which are based, in hypothesized developmental sequencing of knowledge and cultural expectations towards adulthood. Further, youth collegiate environments assume an anticipatory focus upon a future career and independent adult leadership, and provision of a universe of a contained "extracurricula" to bring key learning stimuli of the world into the collegiate environment. Adults live "in" the world and are creators and actors in this broader cultural context. The ethos of an adult-oriented environment suggests a clear recognition and integration of that world and the adult experiences of that world.

**Learning of Expertise.** In the connecting classroom, learning is contextually situated and not defined through hierarchical status roles of teacher and learner. Rather it is learning in community in social participation, recognizing there are varied expertise based in social cultures, as well as in disciplinary cultures (Lave & Wenger, 1991). It also acknowledges that adult learners consider knowledge learning in relation to past knowledge based in experiential understandings and applications in the broader world. The institution, the instructor, the learner, and the learner's multiple communities define the persons and resources that are valid conveyers of expertise. Unlike young adult

learners, adult learners bring expertise to the classroom and also define the particular value of expertise for learning based in their adult worlds.

In youth-oriented collegiate environments, the faculty instructor with his/her expertise in the disciplinary content is the expert and the student and his or her limited knowledge base defines the novice status. In adult-oriented connecting classrooms, there is a range of novice-expert roles of faculty and students. Because learning is interactive and contextual in the connecting classroom, there is a clear social participation structure of distributed expectations of expertise connected to the worlds of discipline content, individual action and practice, and adulthood. Adult learners may engage in a variety of roles in learning expertise as student novice, of learning practitioner with experiential expertise, of aspiring expert, or of knowledge expert in certain areas of knowledge and action. These roles and belief perspectives each implies a different sort of responsibility of engagement in learning or conveying expertise, a different set of role relations, and a different interactive involvement between faculty, students, content, and the adult worlds of work, family, community and college (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The nature of learning expertise is no longer faculty instructor disseminating expertise content to the novice learner. Rather it is learning through classroom and life participation in a variety of social worlds and engaging in actions, understandings, and discourse across a number of communities of social practice. Because one of the outcomes of learning expertise is to be a knowledgeable actor in both content and practice, adult learning outcomes reflect a broader range of expectations. These expectations include greater competence and understanding in academic knowledge, individual life roles, learner engagement in classroom culture, and the situated communities of practice of the adult learner.

The connecting classroom for the adult learner is embedded in this reframed understanding and set of practices of socially situated expertise and in recognition of the broader engagement in expertise within all adult life roles and worlds. Adults do understand and act as classroom learners who engage in learning for demonstration of good grades, yet most adult learners desire and expect greater and more diverse outcomes from learning in the connecting classroom based within their worlds of expertise.

**Nature of Teaching and Learning**. Traditional, tacit understandings of collegiate student learning suggest that teaching and learning is constructed and orchestrated by an expert faculty member within the structure of a classroom. As previously discussed in the section on expertise, teaching/learning strategies for young adults are focused upon assumptions of a novice learner who learns through a disciplinary knowledge accretion process. The metaphor of the connecting classroom suggests a very different learning process. For adults in the connecting classroom, learning is constructed through the adult learner's life biography, through the social context of knowledge expertise, and through the communities of practice of its members. The teaching learning process for adult undergraduates is most potent and effective when based in adult's prior knowledge schemata which reflects both disciplinary and life world knowledge. In addition, adult learning occurs in generative reciprocity in a learning community, which involves active, collaborative learning. It involves active learning engagement across communities of practices with concomitant roles of student, discipline content, work, life, community, and the adult self.

The metaphor of the connecting classroom suggests that the teaching/learning process is a climate and set of interactions that are both within and beyond the campus

classroom environment. Because adults are part of the world, they make meaning of their learning and actively engage in learning through that broader world. Also with the continuing infusion of distance learning strategies, as well as the specialized engagement of learners in applied projects, action research projects, and other strategies which engage the learner in the broader world, adults also experience connected classroom learning through current active, collaborative learning classroom strategies.

The connecting classroom assumes that individuals have "connections" and relationships to a wide variety of understandings, knowledge, and practices. And it assumes that adult learning experiences serve both generative and reconstructive functions. The learning of the connecting classroom both modifies the learners' knowledge base, but it also impacts their sense of self, of action in the world, and of their connection to the broader cultural context. Further, the outcomes of a teaching/learning process move beyond an integration of the content, it also suggests providing knowledge for action in the world. Adult learners are change agents in their life roles. Thus, collegiate learning is not knowledge for preparation for the future; it is knowledge for current action and change in the adult world.

**Living in a multicultural learning society.** The connecting classroom reflects an alternative worldview, which reframes the place of student, and the key influencers that define the learner's place in the world. It challenges past assumptions that collegiate learning solely occurs within a collegiate campus and is solely influenced through socialized rituals and practices of that collegiate culture. Previous beliefs and research suggest that quality collegiate student learning and development occur solely within this world of the college, its culture, and its traditions. There has always been an historic

tension of these beliefs when examining the specialized engagement of adult learners who participate part-time, who commute, and who seek focused involvement within the classroom. These past operational assumptions and beliefs have often characterized adults as marginal and uninvolved. And they have also implied that adults would be unable to be successful learners because they are unable to be immersed in the world of the college environment.

The connecting classroom for adult learners suggests that the place of the learner is in the broader world, a world that is multicultural, as opposed to a uni-cultural world of the collegiate environment. In the world of today's adult learners, adults actively engage in a wide variety of cultures and live multiple roles through these cultures. The connecting classroom acknowledges, embraces, and incorporates these cultures and views. However, this multicultural perspective is more than the inclusion of cultures of gender, race, ethnicity, and class, it also incorporates the cultures of family, work, community, and adult beings.

The connecting classroom also reflects the society of lifelong learning and of the primacy of intellectual capital. The place of the adult learner is in a broader context of the learning society. Adult learners view their societal context and engage in collegiate learning from this different place of engaging in a learning society. These adult learners recognize the impact of a collegiate credential on their access, mobility, and security in jobs. They are part of a world where continued learning is often mandated by their work environment, by their professional roles, or by their communities of practice. They daily engage in a world where currency of knowledge and related skills has become the condition for viable achievement. Further, many adults recognize that the world of an

educated adult reflects a set of perspectives, knowledge, and metacognitive skills difficult to gain through self-directed learning. They seek out the collegiate environment to engage in a culture of the liberal arts tradition and professional preparation where they become collegiate educated adults. Adult students recognize that collegiate learning is more than just developing their intellectual skills. They recognize that they must be active participants in a learning society where they enhance their agency in work, family, and community.

Often undergraduate collegiate learners view their world through a microscope. This fourth element suggests that collegiate learners need binoculars to understand learning in a knowledge society. Many adult undergraduates are also engaging in continued substantive learning in their work, family, and community roles, while also engaged in undergraduate studies. Often they are creating new knowledge and conducting instructional activities as experts in those other adult life roles. Thus, the connecting classroom acknowledges and incorporates their other worlds of learning and a multicultural society of learning.

**Implications of the Connecting Classroom**

Being connected in some way - having venues within the college experience to make connections with others, to one's self through others, and somehow learning to feel like one belongs – has emerged as a critical dimension of the college experience. We have seen that for traditional-aged students, the focus of the "connecting" and social integration characteristic of college outcomes occurs largely through non-classroom experiences. For nontraditional students, however, who are typically older and bring to the college setting years of experience in work and family roles, this view of

connectedness does not seem to work. For these students, the classroom experience itself serves as a kind of focal point of their college experience, a location in which notions of integration and connectedness are substantially different in both content and process.

Many adult learners have been working for several years and many have their own families, with their attendant responsibilities. Their life-worlds are multi-dimensional and complex. Outside of the collegiate setting, these adult students are integrated within a variety of social and cultural settings. They rarely look to their college experience as a primary means of social integration. The social space of the classroom provides adult learners with an environment in which they are able to reflect on and reconstruct the various meaning structures they have used to guide and make sense of their lives.

This reconstruction of meaning within the adult learners' life experiences is mediated through the subject matter within the context of interactions between the teacher and students, and among the students themselves. When asked, adult students will repeatedly point to connections they are making between their experiences in the classroom and their lives outside of the collegiate context (Dirkx, Amey, and Haston, 1999; Amey & Dirkx, 1999). What they are learning is examined within the context of their prior knowledge and experiences, which both influences and is influenced by the subject matter being studied. These prior experiences help them better understand the content of their studies but this content often calls into question assumptions and beliefs derived from these experiences. The subject matter students pursue in college is often laden with images which evoke their own imaginations and connect the text in powerful ways with their prior experiences (Dirkx, 1998; Kristkaya & Dirkx, forthcoming). These text-based images lead the students both inward toward their own sense of themselves

and outward toward social and cultural dimensions of their lived worlds. As Thomas Moore suggest, this process represents "a delicate cusping of sense impression and interior imagination and the creation of a third place between person and environs....a plane that hovers between things and experience without taking away from either" (Moore, in Romanyshyn, 1999, p. xi-xii). This "third place" represents, in a sense, a meta-text constituted by the new meanings arising for the adult students out of the interaction between their prior knowledge and experiences and the subject matter (Kritskaya & Dirkx, forthcoming). It is this third place that becomes the location of connecting for these learners.

Their interactions with teachers and peers within the classroom provides a means through which these connections are being made. Through the examples and stories used by the teachers and the different experiences that other students relate, adults are able to reflect on and re-work the ways in which they have come to think about various aspects of themselves and the world. While much of this meaning-making seems to revolve around the world of work, students have also indicated ways in which their thinking about family and relationships surfaces in this process of meaning-making as well (Dirkx, Amey, & Haston, 1999). The social interactions which characterize the connecting classroom provide a means through which adult learners may express various dimensions of the multiple roles they play. These interactions become social locations in which the learners' multiple communities of practice intersect and blend. Unlike the highly individual-oriented classrooms which characterize much of traditional teaching, the connecting classroom stresses the creation and maintenance of a *social* space. Similar to other communities of practice to which the adult learner might belong, this space

emphasizes the importance of interaction and collaboration in the learning process. Unlike these other locations, however, which are often hyper-busy with action, the connecting classroom offers sites of pause and reflection for learners, environments in which they exercise and enjoy a contemplative break from the almost constant flow of action in their lives.

It is the reflective, contemplative nature of the classroom setting which provides the potential for integrating and connecting the adult's prior knowledge and experiences with the subject matter and, as a result, reconstructing their life-worlds. We recognize the extent to which this experience characterizes the college experiences of returning adult students varies considerably. Yet, evidence seems to suggest that adult learners see their college experiences in this way. Given this observation, it seems clear that enhancing college outcomes for adult students involves attending to the academic and psychosocial nature of their classroom experiences. What they are looking for out of their college experiences is a way of integrating these experiences within their broader life-worlds. They look to their classroom experiences as a major means to facilitate this integration and connecting.

## Implications for Research and Practice

From our research and analysis, we have presented a new framework for understanding the place, role, and actions of adults within the collegiate environment. The concept and the metaphor of the connecting classroom is clearly targeted to the adult undergraduate learner. However, we also suggest that this concept has credibility and relevance to growing numbers of younger adult undergraduates. In particular, the majority of undergraduates, both young and old, are now working at least 20 hours a

week while attending classes. The majority of adult students and a growing number of younger students are commuters, part-time students, and often lead multiple lives beyond the collegiate environment. Although we are proposing this model specifically for the adult undergraduate student, we also encourage researchers and practitioners to re-examine the current lives of younger adults and selectively apply this model to specific sub-groupings of young adult undergraduates. This theoretical concept of the connecting classroom suggests a number of key implications for both the practice and the research of undergraduate students.

**Teaching and Learning in the Classroom**

We have taken a socio-cultural stance toward our understanding of adult learners' collegiate experience and the meaning they derive from it. Werstsch (1998) has argued that *mediated action*, or human agency in context and with a variety of mediational means or cultural tools (e.g., language, computers), should be the focus of analysis for our understanding of learning from a socio-cultural perspective. This particular focus of analysis has drawn our attention earlier to elements of the connecting classroom – learning of expertise, a different view of the teaching/learning transaction, and the multicultural learning society. But, this focus also introduces several analytic properties that have potential for extending our understanding of how adults make meaning in and from their collegiate experience and achieve various outcomes as a consequence of their return to college. Three particular properties are of particular relevance to our discussion – affordances, time, and internalization.

**Affordances.** These are cultural tools that allow us to act in the world, make meaning of it, and generate new and improved forms of thought (Wertsch, 1998).

Cultural tools (like language, calculators, computers) not only empower us to do certain things, but they also constrain action (e.g., limits of the slide rule in mathematical calculations before the advent of calculators and computers). Cultural tools, as part of context, also transact with our learning in such a way to become central parts of our learning and the meaning we generate in our experiences (e.g., mathematical calculation with calculators has a different meaning than calculations without aid of this cultural tool). While Wertsch and other socio-cultural theorists have focused attention primarily on affordances within particular contexts and settings, we are concerned with this property of mediated action across settings as well – or across the multicultural landscape that is the world of the returning adult college student. This conceptualization requires us to inquire about the extent to which returning adult students are afforded similar cultural tools across the multicultural contexts in which they live, work, and study. It draws our attention again to the need for the connecting classroom to acknowledge and embrace the multiple cultures and views of adult learners. It also draws into question whether the college outcomes adult learners are able to achieve are in part a function of the affordances they have (in their multiple cultures) to make connections between their learnings in these cultures.

**Time.** In Donaldson and Graham's (1999) model of college outcomes for adults, distinctions are made between prior, concurrent, and future experiences of adult learners. Yet, from a socio-cultural perspective time is not divided into units of past, present, and future. As Rogoff (1995) has noted, "Any event in the present is an extension of previous events and is directed toward goals that have not yet been accomplished. As such, the present extends through the past and future and cannot be separated from them" (Rogoff,

1995, p. 155). From this perspective, the connecting classroom provides a lens through which we view learners' complete histories and biographies – past, present, and future – as linked. Adults' participation in college is thus seen within the context of ongoing events and a developmental trajectory across the lifespan, rather than as a discrete, isolated occurrence. This property of mediated action focuses our attention on how adults make meaning of their experience within this broader temporal context and to what extent the connecting classroom actually affords learners the opportunity to make these connections.

**Internalization.** Wertsch (1998) has argued that we need to make distinctions between two forms of internalization – mastery and appropriation. Mastery is characterized as considerations of "knowing how to do" particular actions, and has been focused on primarily in psychological and cognitive studies where declarative and procedural knowledge and the link between these two forms of knowledge are at issue. In contrast, appropriation is characterized as "making something one's own." Mastery may occur without appropriation, and appropriation may also occur without mastery. In the former case, a learner may know a content area well but not "own" the knowledge. In the latter case, a learner may become committed to an interest or way of thinking but has not mastered a deep understanding of the knowledge associated with the interest or way of thinking. In a study of returning adult learner's definition of success in college, Donaldson, Graham, Martindill, Long, and Bradley (1999) found that adult learners make distinctions between their definitions of success in learning and success in college on the basis of both mastery and ownership. Adults who had the broadest definition of success spoke of both mastery and ownership of knowledge, and importantly, they attributed their

ownership of knowledge to the affordances they were provided to make connections between their learnings in class and out. Therefore, the concepts of mastery and appropriation provide us with yet another analytical tool with which to understand the connecting classroom and to inquire about the extent to which the multiple cultures in which adults live afford both mastery and appropriation, or just one aspect of this property of mediated action.

**Adult Student Collegiate Participation and Outcomes**

The connecting classroom metaphor challenges conventional notions of student participation in a collegiate environment and traditional assumptions and models which designate a common set of desired outcomes for all collegiate students through common experiences. One of the constant threads through our discussions of the connecting classroom is the need for new understandings of the nature of adult student engagement in the collegiate enterprise. These understandings are further extended through the movement of higher education towards distance education, alternative assessment models for credit of experiential efforts, and the blurring of boundaries among educational providers. If the connecting classroom reflects adult engagement in the learning society as well as the collegiate environment, how can we redefine what should be evidence of effective participation in learning experiences and of valuable learning outcomes? No longer are *in situ* models of student learning and participation relevant and viable for most collegiate campuses and most collegiate undergraduate students.

The connecting classroom reframes the nature of the learning enterprise for all students and all colleges. It questions the assumed control and authority over the curriculum, the learning, and the delivery systems. It draws attention to who creates and

mediates the potent learning experiences that would reflect key student outcomes. And it reexamines the nature of collegiate knowledge and expertise for both an undergraduate education and for a learning society demanding continuous learning. It assumes that undergraduate students will participate in multiple institutions during their journey to completion of degree. It assumes that the majority of students will engage in multiple forms of experiential learning, such as cooperative education, service learning, and other notions of content assessment such as CLEP, PONSI/ACCLAIM, and credit from portfolio assessment of academic equivalent learning experiences. And it assumes that most students will experience distance delivery learning experiences beyond the campus.

It challenges institutional assumptions of entry, continuing enrollment, and retention. And it challenges the notions by which institutions attempt to claim ownership of the student (Adelman, 1999). If only 23% of undergraduate students remain in their institution of origin for graduation in a six-year period, should we not be thinking of a broader collaborative model across institutional providers? When 15-25% of graduated seniors seek different or additional credentials through their college as well as other educational providers within the first five years out of college (informal findings from two institutions), what is the relevancy of traditional notions of college student outcomes for an undergraduate degree? What are assumptions that are meaningful, when we recognize the open and fluid environment for most learners, whether it be based on a consumer mentality, an access interest, or a resource of money and time issue. These historic concepts of participation and retention speak more appropriately to prison-like environments, than to the open and competitive environment of postsecondary education, the world of virtual learning, and the very purposeful actions by many students for quality

learning on their terms and on their time schedule. The connecting classroom challenges us to consider who are student clientele are, how they live and learn in this learning society, and how we are only one of many possible resources for learning in their lives.

**Institutional Effectiveness**

Historically, institutional effectiveness has been framed on a young adult student model of an isolated educational environment for the relatively inexperienced novice learner who does continuous learning to completion of degree. The concept of the connected classroom challenges many of the common assumptions and policies regarding what constitutes institutional effectiveness. The majority of undergraduate students, both young and old, are living in adult roles, are often part-time students and workers of at least 20 hours a week. They may be married, raising children, and have community leadership obligations. An increasing number of learners enter or reenter an institution with prior collegiate participation from other institutions, with possible credit hours from assessment or competency-based alternatives, and with engagement in other providers of education and learning within the broader learning society. And an increasing number of students are becoming distance education learners.

The concept of the connecting classroom suggests a new focus upon institutional effectiveness defined beyond the classroom credit hour learning and beyond learning within the campus context. It suggests that institutional effectiveness must take into account adult learning through societal contexts of work, family, and community life roles, and in collaboration with other learning providers across society. It suggests that institutional effectiveness cannot be defined by campus boundaries or specific institutional credit hour accrual. The nature of the student learning experience, whether it

be a part-time adult worker, or a geographically isolated younger learner participating in distance education strategies, must be reconsidered for measures of what should be institutional mission, goals, and outcomes. Both institutional policies and various student entry, adaptation and support services must be also redefined for students who are more often off-campus and in the world and where learning occurs beyond the collegiate classroom. Lastly, it also suggests that effectiveness must be reframed to reflect a collegiate interaction with the learning society through learners who live in both worlds of the college and of the learning society. No longer is institutional effectiveness an autonomous set of actions. No longer is a modularized accretion of faculty-driven credit hours. Rather, it has become a collaborative interdependency of lifelong learning focused upon the learners in the broader society. Policy, mission, and judgement of effectiveness must be reconfigured and redefined based within this new clientele, new relationships, and new context.

**Epilogue**

The metaphor of the "connecting classroom" suggests many new perspectives and understandings for policy development, instructional designs and processes, and research endeavors. This new conceptualization of the adult learner experience also raises questions as to how the collegiate experience is shaped by the nature of the adult learners and their presence on campus. There is considerable evidence that adult learners are influencing and affecting institutional practices, procedures, and policies such as when classes are offered, how often, and through what mediums. There is also considerable evidence that the presence of adult learners is also influencing instructional practices within higher education, particularly with new distributed learning—of distance learning

and technology-enhanced experiences. Many of these new instructional practices provide accommodation to varied lifestyles, of accommodating diverse adult life role schedules and of providing quality experiences to adults which reflect recent knowledge construction in relation to its interactions with the adult life world understandings and applications. The participation of adult students in varied forms of higher education is also impacting teachers' understandings and expectations of what it means to be a college student, what are meaningful learning experiences, and the potential development of understandings beyond an academic context and prior knowledge to current world.

As we enter the new millenium and an increasingly dynamic environment of postsecondary education, there is need to understand both current adult learner involvement and learning in higher education, as well as to delineate new policies, programs, and instructional processes which enhance those significant engagements and learning outcomes. Successful higher education for the future will be posed to adapt and adjust to the changing profile and contexts of the adult learner, the learning society, and to the evolving understandings of academic quality and integrity through these more complex interrelationships.

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